

Hill Session Assails U.S. Over Laos

The Nixon administration was accused during an extraordinary secret Senate session last June 7 of withholding information and misleading Congress about growing U.S. military involvement in the Laotian war.

The meeting was held at the request of Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield (D-Mont.) to brief the Senate on a then-top secret staff report on Laos. The report was made public Monday and the transcript of the secret session was placed in the Congressional Record yesterday.

In clearing the transcript for release, the administration indirectly acknowledged the presence of Central Intelligence Agency advisers in Laos, despite the prohibition against U.S. advisory personnel in Laos and Cambodia written into the 1970 Cooper-Church amendment.

Rise in U.S. Aid

Symington told the Senate, on the basis of the report, that American military assistance to the Royal Laotian government has trebled since 1967 and is 25 times as large as it was when it began in 1963.

"We have been appropriating money for this war in the blind," said Symington.

During the June 7 session Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John Stennis acknowledged that the Defense Department had not been able to account fully for how it spent its \$2.5 billion in military spending authority for Southeast Asia during the last fiscal year. Said Stennis:

"The Department of Defense told us frankly, 'We are just not certain exactly how much money was spent through these funds in the various countries,' although they made an effort to keep up with it. With bombers flying everywhere and soldiers coming and going, and (deleted) and everything going on, I can see the difficulty. I was not patient with it at first, but I came to understand it better."

Spending Limits Sought

Symington and other members of the Foreign Relations Committee have been trying to impose spending limits on the Pentagon for the war in Laos. The Missouri Democrat has proposed a \$200 million ceiling on assistance to Laos, exclusive of the costs of bombing the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Some informed Senate sources estimate the annual costs of bombing the Trail at more than half a billion dollars.

The secret Senate exchange also revealed that Defense Secretary Melvin Laird refused on grounds of military sensitivity to respond to a Foreign Relations Committee query on U.S. military activities in Laos.

Symington said that all but one of the questions Laird declined to answer were answered by U.S. civilian and military officials stationed in Laos and Thailand during a two-week field trip by two committee staff members.